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HARRIS COUNTY

COVID-19 VACCINE EQUITY STRATEGY SUMMARY



Harris County
Public Health
Building a Healthy Community



LINA HIDALGO

OVERVIEW

In late December 2020, Harris County Public Health (HCPH) began receiving and distributing weekly allocations of COVID-19 vaccines from the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). As residents of Harris County, we are all interconnected. Recognizing that fully recovering from the pandemic will require equitable access to COVID-19 therapies and interventions, including vaccines, this strategy presents a framework to ensure disproportionately vulnerable populations are not left behind. **As a community, we will only reach herd immunity if access to resources is efficient, fair, and equitable.**

Harris County's vaccine distribution efforts and approach will be continuously updated and adjusted based on the latest trends, vaccine supply, and other factors. Residents seeking information on how to register for a vaccine or to learn more about additional recovery resources should visit www.ReadyHarris.org for more information.

EQUITY IN VACCINE REGISTRATION

On Tuesday, January 26th, HCPH expanded registration from solely frontline workers to include residents directly by launching a COVID-19 Vaccination Portal for residents who meet the DSHS current criteria for receiving a vaccine, as well as those who may become eligible when DSHS expands its criteria. The portal allows individuals who register to be placed on a "smart waitlist," which HCPH uses to select (at random) and contact those who are eligible for an appointment as vaccines become available. The waitlist is available via the vaccine information link on ReadyHarris.org and



directly at <https://vacstrac.hctx.net>. Eligible residents without internet access have been provided a phone number (832-927-8787) they can call to be placed on the waitlist. The website and call center provide services in multiple languages, including Spanish and Vietnamese. Once individuals are selected to receive a vaccine, they are called or emailed a link with instructions on how to select a location and time to get vaccinated at a HCPH site. Individuals contacted for a vaccine have 48 hours to schedule an appointment before it is offered to someone else, and they are put back on the waitlist, which is intended to help prevent HCPH from experiencing delays in getting out the vaccine each week. The County's "smart waitlist" system does not use a first-come, first-served process for allocating vaccine appointments. In order to ensure fair access for elderly residents, working families, and vulnerable populations, registrants on the waitlist are instead selected at random from eligible subgroups in accordance with DSHS guidelines (currently, only Phases 1A and 1B are approved by DSHS to receive the vaccine). Those who are not eligible to receive the vaccine at this time can still register for the waitlist to be contacted when they become eligible and as vaccine supplies increase.

PRIORITY #1: PHASE 1A AND 1B - HEALTHCARE WORKERS & PEOPLE 65 AND OLDER WITH COMORBIDITIES

In selecting eligible individuals from the waitlist, HCPH does not prioritize between those who are eligible under Phase 1A- versus Phase 1B. Eligible individuals are selected at random (rather than on a first-come, first-serve basis) from the following age cohorts, with oldest cohorts prioritized first: 75+, 65-74, 55-64, 45-54, 35-44, 25-34, 18-24

PRIORITY #2: FUTURE PHASES

Those who are not qualified to receive the vaccine under Phase 1A or 1B are still able to register for the waitlist but will not be contacted to schedule an appointment until DSHS expands its eligibility criteria beyond Phase 1A and 1B.

EQUITY IN VACCINE DISTRIBUTION



Harris County Public Health (HCPH) has established the following three-pronged approach to vaccinating qualified population groups under the State of Texas' vaccination plan. HCPH intends to remain flexible in its duty as a vaccine hub and, as circumstances require, may adjust its relative allocation of the vaccine among these approaches.

LARGE DRIVE-THRU SITE OPERATIONS: APPROX 70% OF WEEKLY ALLOCATION

Large Drive-Thru Site Operations: HCPH provides the vaccine to individuals selected according to our smart waitlist randomization procedure at these sites, which allow for efficient, high-volume throughput without compromising the ability to maintain social

distancing. Based on the limited supply of vaccines, HCPH is currently implementing 2 first-dose sites and 2 second-dose sites each week. These sites rotate between different locations so that appointments can be offered in different parts of Harris County.

COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTHCARE PARTNER DISTRIBUTION: APPROX 15-20% OF WEEKLY ALLOCATION

Community-Based Healthcare Partner Distribution: HCPH has established partnerships with community healthcare providers that serve uninsured and vulnerable populations, namely the Harris Health public hospital system and Federally Qualified Health Centers, to administer up to 15-20% of its weekly allocation. This approach allows HCPH to expand its geographic reach for decentralized and widespread delivery of vaccines to high-risk, underserved, and uninsured patients across Harris County.

VACCINATION DISTRIBUTION UNITS: APPROX 10-15% OF WEEKLY ALLOCATION

Vaccine Deployment Units (VDUs): HCPH has established small, mobile Vaccine Deployment Units (VDUs) to mitigate inequities and reduce accessibility gaps for disadvantaged and underserved communities at increased risk from COVID-19. VDUs receive around 10-15% of HCPH's weekly allocation to vaccinate eligible individuals in

- **Certain congregate settings.** HCPH is prioritizing congregate settings based on the type of facility, risk characteristics of the resident population, and guidance from the State of Texas and the Centers for Disease Control. The focus is on congregate-care facilities not already served by other partners and where large numbers of high-risk, older residents live together.
- **Zip codes identified as especially vulnerable to COVID-19.** Zip codes that have experienced a higher disease burden and whose residents are disproportionately at risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19 due to clinical and social vulnerabilities.

VDUs can operate as walk-through or drive-through sites.

EQUITY IN COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Harris County has used all platforms available to provide accurate and timely information to residents regarding the threat of the pandemic along with steps they must take to support county efforts to protect public health and safety.



STAY SMART, DO YOUR PART MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Beginning in December 2020, HCPH launched a new campaign urging residents to take simple steps beyond wearing masks, social distancing, and washing hands to conclude learning about the safety and efficacy of vaccines. The campaign brand, “[Stay Smart, Do Your Part](#)” was chosen to highlight the vital role that the community plays in helping the region finally recover sustainably from the pandemic and help our economy get moving again.

In February, the campaign launched a focus on addressing vaccine hesitancy, particularly among communities of color in Harris County. According to [a recent national survey](#) consisting of minority groups and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, almost 40% of respondents would refuse vaccination if offered one today or are undecided about whether they would accept getting a vaccine at some point.

The multilingual paid advertising push includes a website and advertising featuring credible messengers and asking residents to learn about the safety and efficacy of vaccines and to get vaccinated once they are eligible.

The campaign also pursues grassroots partnerships with local groups and organizations already engaging communities to end the pandemic. As part of the grassroots effort, the

campaign developed and distributed an [informational toolkit in multiple languages](#), including Spanish and Vietnamese, for schools, businesses, and other community groups to use and share encouraging residents to learn about vaccines, dispel myths and facts, and find out where and when to get vaccinated.

USING DATA TO SUPPORT EQUITY

To account for the differential impact of COVID-19 in geographic regions and communities across Harris County, Harris County is working to reach deep into affected communities to administer vaccines to eligible residents of one or more priority zip codes at an on-site location each week, starting mid-February. Zip codes are determined using the weighted framework discussed below.



HIGH COVID-19 VULNERABILITY PRIORITIZATION FRAMEWORK

HCPH has determined priority zip codes to guide where targeted vaccine sites should be located based on the following weighted factors framework that includes equity and COVID burden on those zip codes. Top 10 zip codes will be re-assessed each month.

- To develop an overall prioritization score for each zip code, each factor is given a score based on its percentile ranking for that zip code in the county.

Then, the factors are combined with weights that sum to 100% to produce the overall score of a zip code. Using this analysis, zip codes are assigned an overall score and then ranked to identify the zip codes with highest priority.

Why use the Social Vulnerability Index?

The National Academy of Sciences recommends making special efforts to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine to people in high-SVI areas because “People from racial and ethnic minority groups face risks associated with health care access and utilization, as they are less likely to be insured than non-Hispanic Whites. Furthermore, health care access and utilization can be limited by lack of transportation, lack of child care, the inability to take time off work, communication barriers, cultural differences between patients and providers, or discrimination. Some of the occupations designated as “essential work” during the COVID-19 pandemic, including health care professions, farming, grocery workers, and public transportation, have disproportionate representation of certain racial and ethnic minority groups.” [A Framework for Equitable Allocation of COVID-19 Vaccine](#), National Academy of Sciences (October 2020)

- **Social Vulnerability Index:** The Centers for Disease Control has created its Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) using 15 U.S. census variables that influence a community’s ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from any type of disaster. The score that is assigned to a census tract for this criterion is the percentile of that census tracts SVI value within Harris County. Census tract scores for SVI are then converted to zip code scores by combining the scores of all census tracts within a zip code proportionally to the population of those census tracts within the zip code.
- **Number of Days with 10+ new cases/100k population since February:** The number of days in which a given zip code has had an elevated number of cases is a measure of the overall burden of COVID-19 on that zip code. Each zip code is ranked on the number of days that zip code had 10+ new cases/100k population since February, and the score that is assigned to each zip code for this criterion is the percentile of that zip code’s number of days with 10+ new cases/100k population within Harris County.
- **Number of Days with 25+ new cases/100k population in the last month:** The number of days in which a given zip code has had an elevated number of cases within the past month is a measure of the current burden of COVID-19 on that zip code. Each zip code is ranked on the number of days that zip code had 25+ new cases/100k population in the past month, and the score that is assigned to each zip code for this criterion is the percentile of that zip code’s number of days with 25+ new cases/100k population in the past month within Harris County.

Factor	Weight
Centers for Disease Control Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)	50%
Number of Days with 25+ new cases/100k population in the last month	15%
Number of Days with 10+ new cases/100k population since February	35%
Overall Prioritization Score	100%

TOP 10 HIGH-RISK ZIP CODES

MAP: HIGH-RISK ZIP CODES

#	ZIP
1	77032
2	77857
3	77506
4	77093
5	77029
6	77087
7	77078
8	77022
9	77502
10	77504

